

The Daily Union
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Title: Children & Stress

Definition of Stress: *The response of your brain and body to any demand.*

Commonly considered an adult condition, stress can also effect children. As an adult, you might minimize the impact stress could have on youth. In fact, stress is a reality in a large number of children.

You might wonder, "What do kids have to stress about?" Stress in children can result from school, conflict in the home or among friends, changes in routines, homework, family disruptions, and many other situations.

You can observe stress in children and adults alike. It is commonly an obvious physical reaction such as a headache or muscle aches. It can be shown with tears, emotional or behavioral changes such as withdrawal, shyness, or being worried.

Reactions to stress in children can vary based on their age and stage of development. Younger children, who lack an expansive vocabulary to talk about stress or the situations causing it, may show an increased frequency of crying or temper tantrums. Older children, even when they do have the vocabulary to express their feelings, might show more hostile and angry responses to situations you might consider relatively irrelevant. Asking them to put their clean clothes away may become a battle when before it was a normal part of your home's routine.

When you begin to notice stress in your children or grandchildren, you can intervene with stress-relief activities that can help the child cope with the pressure of stress before a little problem becomes a big one.

Penn State Cooperative Extension, as part of their Better Kid Care program, offers the following strategies for children coping with stress:

Exercise: This is one of the best ways to relieve stress for children (and adults.) You can encourage the child to participate in organized sports such as club basketball, or city recreation baseball, take them to the YMCA for a fun swim, go for a brisk long walk or run with them, or you can spend time with them outside simply playing. Encourage them to invite a friend over to go to the park with, or take them to a bike path where they can ride with a friend. Regular exercise can help children feel less stressed, and if children feel they are having an especially stressful day, a few hours of active play can reduce their stress.

Deep Breathing: As soon as a child can count to four, you can teach them how to do deep breathing exercises that are proven to reduce stress. Under your guidance, ask the child to take in a deep slow breath while you count to four and then tell them to

exhale slowly as you count to four again. Continue the breathing exercise until you see a change toward calmness with the child.

Muscle Relaxation: A common physical response to stress is that our muscles tighten and stay tightened – resulting in muscle soreness and perhaps even cramps. Children, like adults, can easily learn how to tense and relax each muscle group while they are lying down. Begin the activity with the top of the head by asking the child to focus on tightening muscles and then release muscles across their forehead, through their eyelids, across their cheeks, and so forth. Help the child work down their body to the tips of their toes by tensing up each muscle then releasing as they move through their body. You may want to encourage them to remain lying down while you walk them through a short series of deep breathing exercises to finish the relaxation process.

Visual Imagery: This activity allows a child to transition from their present reality of worries and pressure to a more positive and relaxing environment using images and thoughts. You ask the child to think of a favorite place, a relaxing point in time, or a special happy memory. Explain that they should close their eyes and imagine that they are at the favorite place. Encourage them to spend some time focusing on those positive thoughts so that they can block out upsetting ones.

Sensory Activities: Connecting with the body's senses can have a calming effect on children experiencing stress. Molding clay is a popular childhood material that provides wonderful sensory experience. They can squeeze, pound, and manipulate molding clay when they feel stress. Another option is to use finger painting or playing in a small dishpan of water to stimulate relaxing sensations.

Although the stress response is normal, it can cause health problems as it elevates. It could even become chronic. This type of stress can result from an ongoing persistent stressful situation, such as homelessness or from a traumatic experience or event such as a natural disaster or witnessing a violent act or series of acts. While today's children may experience minor episodes of stress, ongoing levels of high stress can take its toll on a child's psychological and physical well-being. Untreated chronic stress can cause anxiety, high blood pressure, disrupted sleep patterns, and a weakened immune system. According to research, major health concerns such as heart disease, depression, and obesity have been linked to excessive stress.

If you find that using stress reduction strategies have not been successful with children in your care, ask for help from a health professional immediately. Your doctor may be able to assist you with developing a treatment plan to help your child minimize, if not extinguish, their feelings of significant stress.

For more information on stress and techniques to reduce it in your family, check out the Geary County K-State Research & Extension's Health Home and Family page at:

<https://www.geary.k-state.edu/health-home-family/>. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!